

Audacity and Courage

The Youngest Intelligence Star

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The Congo in May 1966 was a country in turmoil. A civil war was being fought, and the various factions were supported by foreign forces. In the capital, Kinshasa, the government had more control, but armed men were a common sight, and there was general lawlessness after dark. Embassy families lived in locked, barred, and "guarded" houses because crime and break-ins were routine.

One night, the 14-year-old daughter of the CIA station chief was awakened by the noise of people ransacking her dressing room, which was the only means of escape from her bedroom. She pretended to be asleep as three masked burglars entered her bedroom and began searching for valuables. One took a ring and bracelet from her hand and wrist while she pretended to sleep.

The girl heard the burglars discussing the possibility of harming her. She understood their local language, Lingala, but she did not understand the word rape, only that it was a physical threat. They turned on the lights, and one used a butcher knife to cut her nightgown. She managed to roll over and cover herself with the sheet, still feigning sleep. Her greatest fear at that time was that perhaps the men had already killed her mother and father.

When one robber pricked her neck with the knife, she could no longer pretend she was asleep. She started to speak, but the robber made a sign and said in French that he would kill her if she did. He grabbed her arm and tried to pull her from the bed. She wrenched free, jumped out of the other side of the bed, and declared in Lingala that he should keep his hands off her. Pulling on her dressing gown, she faced the armed robbers and warned them not to harm anyone in the house.

Quick Thinking

Surprised by her self-assurance and her ability to speak Lingala, the robbers said they wanted money and did not want to hurt anyone. She agreed to help them find money, and she led them out of her bedroom and dressing room. As they walked through the house, she boldly warned them in Lingala that the American Embassy had "secret and magic" ways of identifying people who harmed Americans. She told them that Americans always kill such people.

She led them into two spare rooms which they searched for valuables. Then they ordered her to take them to her parents' bedroom. They held her in front of them--one robber held a knife at her throat, another had a gun at her back. She opened the door, turned on the overhead light, and in a loud voice she told her parents to wake up and warned them that three armed men were behind her.

Her parents had been sleeping soundly. Her father jumped out of bed when he heard her voice, but her words did not register immediately. When he realized a robber was holding a knife at his daughter's throat, his first instinct was to get his gun from under his pillow. He was too far away from his gun, however, and she warned him again that there was another robber with a gun at her back.

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Narrow Escape

The robbers forced the father, mother, and daughter into a corner of the bedroom. Two robbers armed with a knife and gun covered them. The third searched for valuables, and for 15 to 20 minutes he took jewelry, cameras, and other items. All the while, the mother harangued the robbers in French. The robbers demanded money. The father denied there was any, and the mother ordered them out of the house. As the robbers menaced them, the daughter intervened to tell her parents that the robbers meant business. She took her father's money and threw it at the feet of the robber with the gun, and he ordered the third robber to pick it up.

The daughter repeated her warning in Lingala regarding the American Embassy, and the mother continued to "chew out" the robbers in French and demand they leave her house. Finally, as if to rid themselves of the troublesome women, the robbers ordered the family into the bathroom. The daughter entered first, followed by the mother and father. They slammed the door behind them, threw their bodies against the door and locked it before the robbers could enter. The daughter grabbed two large water bottles to use as weapons and gave one to her father. The family called through the window for help. After a few minutes, their cook's voice could be heard. The robbers had fled. The family unlocked the bathroom door, and the father and daughter armed themselves with handguns and rushed out to hunt for the robbers.

Justice is Done

After some false starts, the local police managed to capture the robbers, who were eventually tried and executed. In retrospect, the daughter believes the robbers were people who learned the layout of the house when they were employed to install grills on the windows--ironically, the reaction to an earlier attempted break-in.

The family learned later that the robbers knew where the daughter slept and planned to use her as a hostage. They also learned these robbers had killed other families, gunning them down in their bathrooms. Only one Belgian family had survived a similar attack by fighting off the burglars.

Well-Deserved Recognition

The daughter believes her mother should have had an award because it was probably her diatribe which disrupted the robbers' efforts to intimidate her and her family. When the daughter recalls the incident now, it resembles a movie. She does not see herself as a hero. She believes people who have shown real courage are those who were hostages or in hostage situations for long periods of time.

Nevertheless, the daughter received the Intelligence Star--the youngest person ever to be so honored--in recognition of her courageous conduct which helped save herself and her father and mother. Her quick appraisal of the situation, calm deportment, knowledge and use of the local language, exploitation of local lore, and resolute action served her well as a teenager, and they continue to do so now in her career as a case officer in the Directorate of Operations.